



ISSN: 0975-833X

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ECO - FEMINISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

**\*Seema**

Department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi

#### ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

##### **Article History:**

Received 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2013

Received in revised form

10<sup>th</sup> November, 2013

Accepted 28<sup>th</sup> December, 2013

Published online 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2014

##### **Key words:**

Eco feminism, Environmental Movement,  
Biodiversity, Environment.

This paper entitled "Eco feminism and Environmental Movement in India" deals with the participation of women in the environmental movements in India. These Grassroots environmental movements following Gandhian nonviolent tradition is expanding in India. These movements differ from the movement of western countries. It concerned with both environmental preservation and issues of economic equity and social justice. This paper we discuss major environmental movements like Chipko movement, Narmada movement, Western Ghats Movement and also analysis the role of these movements in the Indian society, focuses on the concept and role of eco feminism and its critics in India.

Copyright ©Seema. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

#### INTRODUCTION

There have been many movements around the world over time concerned to save the environment and lives of those dependent on it. Few important amongst them are like the famous Chipko movement, Narmada Bacho Andolon, Save the western Ghats etc in India. Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and in the United States. Movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US and the Green Belt movement in Kenya are all labeled as "eco-feminist" movements. It's being called ecofeminist because it gives and take care of many lives. These movements attempt to demonstrate the "resistance politics" (Quinby 1990) working at the micro-levels of power and point to the connections between women and environment. They also claim to contribute to an understanding of the interconnections between the domination of persons and nature by sex, race and class. Eco feminism (Feminist and Ecology movement of 1970s and early 1980s) emerged in the west as the product of peace in terms of ecology and feminist. The term "Ecofeminism" was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It was further developed by Ynestra King (New York City) in about 1976 and became a movement in 1980. For the development of this movement the first eco feminist conference – "Women and Life on Earth: Eco feminism in the 80s", at Amherst, Massachusetts, US (Spretnak 1990) were held and as a result of this movement the concept of eco feminism has the world wide implication. Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. The 'corporate and military warriors' aggression against the environment was perceived almost physically as an aggression

against a female's body. This is expressed by many women who participated in these movements<sup>1</sup>. Thus, women in Switzerland who demonstrated against the Seveso poisoning<sup>2</sup> (deals with the concept of ecology and feminist relations at present time) wrote: We should think of controlling our bodies in a more global way, as it is not only men and doctors who behave aggressively towards our bodies, but also the multinationals<sup>3</sup>. Women's were a driving force in movements against the construction of nuclear power plants in Germany, but to them also the connection between technology, war against nature, against women and future generation was clear. The Chernobyl disaster<sup>4</sup> (Germany attracted large demonstration against environmental depletion) in particular provoked a spontaneous expression of women's outrage and resistance against this war technology and the general industrial war system. The illusion that atomic technology was malevolent when used in bombs but benevolent when used to generate electricity for the North's domestic appliances was dispelled. Many women also understood that their consumerist lifestyle was very much part of this system of war against nature, women, foreign peoples and future generations.

#### **Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation**

Gender and diversity are interlinked in many ways. The construction of women as the 'second sex' is linked to the same inability to cope with difference as is the development paradigm that leads to the displacement and extinction of

**\*Corresponding author: Seema**

Department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.

<sup>1</sup> D'Eaubonne 18980p.126

<sup>2</sup> Seveso poisoning The Seveso disaster was an industrial accident that occurred around 12:37 pm July 10, 1976, in a small chemical manufacturing plant approximately 15 km (9.3 mi) north of Milan in the Lombardy region in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Women movement in Switzerland for the protection of the environment.

<sup>4</sup> D' Eaubonne p.130

diversity in the biological world. The patriarchal world view sees man as the measure of all value, with no space for diversity, only for hierarchy. Woman is treated as unequal and inferior. Nature's diversity is seen as not intrinsically valuable in itself; its value is conferred only through economic exploitation for commercial gain<sup>5</sup>. Women's work and knowledge is central to biodiversity conservation and utilization both because they work between 'sectors' and because they perform multiple tasks. Women, as farmers, have remained invisible despite their contribution. Economists tend to discount women's work as 'production' because it falls outside the so-called 'production boundary'. These omissions arise not because few women work, but women undertake diverse responsibility at a time.

### Knowledge and Ignorance

Modern science is projected as a universal, value-free system of knowledge, which by the logic of its method claims to arrive at objective conclusion about life, the universe and almost everything. This dominant stream of modern science, the reductionist or mechanical paradigm, is a specific projection of Western man that originated during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as the much acclaimed scientific revolution. Recently, however the 'third world' and feminist scholarship has begun to recognize that this dominant system emerged as a liberating force not for humanities as a whole (though it legitimized itself in terms of universal benefits for all), but as a Western, male-oriented and patriarchal projection which necessarily entailed the subjugation of both nature and women. Central to this dominant and subjugation is an arbitrary barrier between 'knowledge' (the specialist) and 'ignorance' (the non-specialist). This barrier operates effectively to exclude from the scientific domain consideration of certain vital questions relating to the subject matter of science, or certain forms of non-specialist knowledge.

### Eco-feminism and discourse on 'women' and 'nature'

Eco-feminism collected and reshaped certain ecological struggles in its quest to move radical feminism beyond a biologically determinist<sup>6</sup> impasse. Women are not 'equal to men; rather, women have been socially positioned, in patriarchal societies<sup>7</sup>, in a way that fosters a unique understanding of nature and natural cycles. This unique knowledge needs to be preserved and fostered, as it forms not only the basis of women's present participation in ecological struggles, but a template for a future, harmonious, ecological society. In order to understand the production of this knowledge, Eco-feminism has sought to explain the relations producing a situation in which women are positioned as closer to nature than men<sup>8</sup>.

### Role of women's in Environmental Movements

After Independence in 1947 people in various regions of India have formed nonviolent action movements to protect their environment, their livelihood, and their ways of life. These

environmental movements have emerged from the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh to the tropical forests of Kerala and from Gujarat to Tripura in response to projects that threaten to dislocate people and to affect their basic human rights to land, water, and ecological stability of life-support systems. They share certain features, such as democratic values and decentralized decision making, with social movements operating in India. The environmental movements are slowly progressing toward defining a model of development to replace the current resource-intensive one that has created severe ecological instability (Centre for Science and Environment 1982, 190). Similar grassroots environmental movements are emerging in Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. Throughout Asia and the Pacific citizenry organizations are working in innovative ways to reclaim their environment (Rush 1991). Even with limited resources the environmental movements have initiated a new political struggle for safeguarding the interests of the poor and the marginalized, a women, tribal groups, and peasants. Among the main environmental movements are Chipko Andolan (Barthelemy 1982) and Save the Bhagirathi and Stop Tehri project committee (Manu 1984) in Uttar Pradesh; Save the Narmada Movement (Narmada Bachao Andolan) in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat; youth organizations and tribal people in the Gandhamardan Hills whose survival is directly threatened by development of bauxite deposits; the opposition to the Baliapal and Bhogarai test range in Orissa, the Appiko Movement in the Western Ghats; groups opposing the Kaiga nuclear power plant in Karnataka; the campaign against the Silent Valley project; the Rural Women's Advancement Society (Gramin Mahila Shramik Unnayan Samiti), formed to reclaim waste land in Bankura district; and the opposition to the Gumti Dam in Tripura.

### Case study

#### Narmada Bachao Andolan

Narmada Bachao Andolan is the most powerful mass movement, started in 1985, against the construction of huge dam on the Narmada River. Narmada is the India's largest west flowing river, which supports a large variety of people with distinguished culture and tradition ranging from the indigenous (tribal) people inhabited in the jungles here to the large number of rural population. The proposed Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Sagar will displace more than 250,000 people. The big fight is over the resettlement or the rehabilitation of these people. The two proposals are already under construction, supported by US \$550 million loan by the World Bank (1985). There are plans to build over 3000 big and small dams along the river. It is a multi crore project that will generate big revenue for the government. The Narmada Valley Development plan is the most promised and most challenging plan in the history of India. The proponents are of the view that it will produce 1450 MW of electricity and pure drinking water to 40 million people covering thousand of villages and towns. Some of the dams have been already been completed such as Tawa and Bargi Dams. (Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra) But the opponents say that this hydro project will devastate human lives and bio diversity by destroying thousands of acres of forests and agricultural land. On the other hand it will overall deprive thousands of people of their livelihood. They believe that the water and energy could be provided to the people

<sup>5</sup>Ibid 1980p.142

<sup>6</sup>Who believes in the supersite of nature over man .

<sup>7</sup> Male dominant society like India

<sup>8</sup>Ibid 180p.154

through alternative technological means that would be ecologically beneficial. Led by one of the prominent leader Medha Patkar, it has now been turned into the International protest, gaining support from NGO'S all around the globe. Protestors are agitating the issue through the mass media, hunger strikes, massive marches, rallies and the through the on screen of several documentary films. Although they have been protesting peacefully, but they are been harassed, arrested and beaten up by the police several times. The Narmada Bachao Andolan has been pressurizing the World Bank to withdraw its loan from the project through media.

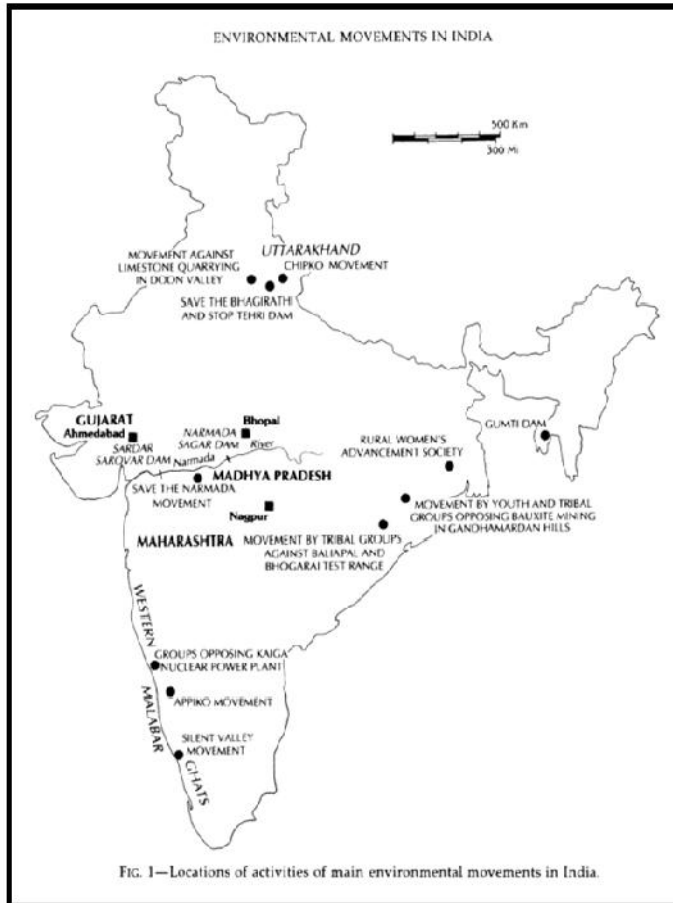


Fig. 1.1. Major Environmental Movements in India

### Chipko Movement

The word chipko means to stick to or to hug and refers to the method used to protect the trees of the Himalaya from commercial timber cutters who have devastated the forests. The movement's activists embrace the tree trunks to interpose their bodies between the trees and the axemen. The Chipko movement is located in the mountainous northern segment of Uttar Pradesh, immediately west of Nepal. The area has long been known as Uttarakhand. Exploitation of the forest by outside entrepreneurs with governmental approval has been the source of conflict between Uttarakhand villages and the state forest department. This conflict, which includes violent incidents, dates to 1821, when the British instituted the Tribal Forest Settlements in Kumaon. The conflict has been accompanied by denial of forest use to the villagers who traditionally depend on its products. The policies have been rationalized by the long-standing assertion that indigenous

agriculturalists and herders caused deforestation by misuse and overuse, but these practices rarely could be observed. The villagers were unsuccessful in their arguments to the government, so they adopted Gandhian nonviolent resistance—they attached themselves to the trees to protect them from the axe. They were successful, and the permit issued to the sporting-goods manufacturer was cancelled. From there the Chipko environmental movement evolve. More than a dozen major and minor incidents of confrontation occurred during the 1970s. Each confrontation was nonviolent and successful. The successes led to increasing national and international publicity and recognition for the movement.

### Save the Western Ghats Movement

This padyatra, jointly organized by a number of environmental groups in 1988, covered over 1,300 km. across the States of Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The March focused attention on the environmental problems of the Western Ghats. The Western Ghats in India cover six states and have an incredible diversity of species as also some of the finest examples of moist deciduous and tropical forests. Preventing the ecological degradation due to construction and other activities is now the main concern of the environmentalists. Bangalore, Karnataka: Environmentalists are reviving a plan to conserve the vast hilly, forested region running parallel to the west coast of peninsular India (western Ghats), recognised as a global biodiversity hotspot.

*"We have to get together again to stop the ecological degradation that is now taking place in the Western Ghats,"*

(Statement by Pandurang Hegde, leader of the Appiko (hug the trees) movement of the 1980s.)

These Movements forced the government to ban tree-felling inside the protected area. The 'Save Western Ghats' movement of the 1980s involved over 20 local and regional people's movements who got together to march the length of the sector between November 1987 and February 1988, in an awareness-building protest against the construction of dams and power stations that destroy one of the world's richest habitats. Movements under this banner influenced government policy to stop the felling of trees in Karnataka and cancel plans for a dam in the Silent Valley which was declared a patch of undisturbed tropical forest and converted into a national park in 1984.

### Eco-feminism & Its Critics in India

In India, the most visible advocate of eco-feminism is Vandana Shiva<sup>9</sup>. One would tend to categorize her work with the ecofeminists of the radical mode, but her critique of the entire development model and its effects on the environment, places her more among the ecofeminists of the socialist framework. Vandana Shiva (1988) critiques modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy, which

<sup>9</sup>Vandana Shiva is an Indian environmental activist and anti-globalization author.

sees *prakriti* as a living and creative process, the “feminine principle”, from which all life arises. Under the garb of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a “resource”. This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women. Women’s special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for “staying alive”, were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science. Shiva, however, notes that Third World women are not simply victims of the development process, but also possess the power for change. She points to the experiences of women in the Chipko movement of the 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas – where women struggled for the protection and regeneration of the forests. Through her analysis, Shiva points out the critical links between the different development perspectives, the process of change brought about by the development and its impact on the environment and the people dependent on it for their subsistence. Further, she argues with Maria Mies<sup>10</sup> that whenever women have protested against ecological destruction or nuclear annihilation, they were “aware of the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature” (Mies 1993, p. 14). These movements were informed by the ecofeminist principles of connectedness, wholeness, inter-dependence and spirituality, in opposition to capitalist patriarchal science that is engaged in disconnecting and dissecting. It is argued that the ecofeminist position, i.e., a subsistence perspective, is rooted in the material base of everyday subsistence production of women the world over. This struggle of women and men to conserve their subsistence base can become the common ground for women’s liberation and preservation of life on earth.

**However, some of the problems with Vandana Shiva’s argument are as follows:**

Shiva’s analysis (in *Staying Alive* 1988) relates to the study of rural women in Northwest India, but she tends to generalize her analysis to cover all Third World women. Gabriel Dietrich (1990, 1992) points out that Shiva seems to presuppose a society that is democratically organized, where people own sufficient land to survive on its produce. She seems to treat caste factors and political options as nonexistent and neglects the realities of hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy and violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities. Like the western ecofeminists, she implicitly essentializes Third World women and sees them as being closer to nature. Besides, the notions of “Shakti” and “Prakriti” are posed as representative of Indian philosophy as a whole. However, the “feminine principle” is largely expressed in Hindu terms which are close to Sankhya philosophy, which is mainly popular in the North. Dietrich<sup>11</sup> wonders what the “feminine principle” would imply for Dalits, tribals, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and other minority communities. Furthermore, Shiva does not analyse religious controls over women, when she discusses the

“shakti” aspects of religion. Meera Nanda (1991) in a scathing attack on Vandana Shiva, brands her a typical neo-populist scholar, who has tried to portray the “West” as inherently vicious and the “Third World” as fundamentally virtuous. She rebukes Shiva for branding modern science as western, inherently masculine (therefore destructive) and just another social construct. Shiva attributes the degradation of nature and the subordination of women mainly to the country’s colonial history and the imposition of a western model of development. She, however, ignores the preexisting inequalities of caste, class, power, privilege and property relations that predate colonialism.

In advocating the ecofeminist principles of women’s special relationship with nature, connectedness, wholeness and so on, Shiva and Mies ignore the question of who acquires what knowledge and how or whether at all, it is articulated. Property relations play a major role in the way in which women and men relate to their environments. In patriarchal societies, women do not have primary rights to land. Their rights to land are mediated through their male relatives. The gap between legal and actual land ownership rights, patrilocal marriages, the segregation of public space and social interaction by age, class and gender, female illiteracy, high fertility, as well as male control over agricultural technology and dissemination of information put women farmers at a disadvantage (Agarwal 1994, p. 475; Jackson 1993, p. 409). Thus women would probably not be inclined to undertake long-term conservation practices. In land cultivated by women as part of family duties and as use of Common Property Resources (CPR), the conservation practices adopted, do not necessarily reflect women’s special knowledge of conservation, as they may be dictated by men. It is usually pointed out that women’s relation to the environment is influenced by requirements of “sustenance”, unlike men who exploit the environment for cash (Shiva 1988, pp.86-87). However, studies show that this is questionable, since women also use the CPRs for fuel wood, fruits etc., for sale in the market. In fact, men use CPRs in more subsistence oriented ways. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan (1991), in their study of the Jharkhand region in Central India, point out that the division of labour between men and women is determined by culturally influenced gender roles rather than sex roles influenced by biology. Through their study they show that women, besides gathering, also took part in hunting. Men also take part in gathering of food in foraging societies.

**Conclusion**

Issues of environment and ecology entered the mainstream discourse on development and social movements only after the Conference on Environment and Development, at Stockholm in 1972. The role of women’s in the environmental movements is immeasurable at that time. Women’s also plays a very important role for the development of a society. The concept of Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. The ‘corporate and military warriors’ aggression against the environment was perceived almost physically as an aggression against a female’s body. This is expressed by many women who participated in these movements. During the past century there has been a

<sup>10</sup> Maria Mies She is Professor of Sociology at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences which is a Fachhochschule in Cologne, Germany. She worked for many years in India. In 1979 she established the Women and Development programme at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands. She has been active in the women’s movement and in women’s studies since the late 1960s

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich a eco feminist of Germany.

progressive encroachment by the state on the rights and privileges of the people to forest resources. The people have resisted it in various parts of India, mainly through the Gandhian non cooperative method of protest, well known as forest satyagraha, that was initially applied to environmental concerns by the Chipko movement during the 1970s. This movement had its origin in the politics of the distribution of the benefits of resources, but it has expanded to include the distribution of ecological costs. The three movements provided a model for the conflicts resolutions over natural resources and a strategy for human survival of a ecological disaster. These movements highlight the interconnections of class, caste and gender issues in it. In fact, one would like to argue, that the women's movement must take up environmental issues that impinge on the survival strategies of a vast majority of women from different castes, classes and race backgrounds. This would help to broad base the movement. On the whole, what is needed is a total change, relating to development, redistribution and institutional structures. Environment and gender issues need to be taken together and the new social movements in India seem to provide the ray of hope for future change.

## REFERENCES

- Amsden, A.H, 'Taiwan's Economic History', Global Crises & Social Movements, Bruke.
- David S. Meyer, Nancy Whittier and Belinda Robnett, 'Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State'. Oxford University Press, USA, 2002
- Gail Omvedt, 'Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India (Socialism and Social Movements)', M E Sharpe Inc Publication, New York, 1992.
- Ghanshyam Shah, 'Social Movements in India: A Review of the Literature'. SAGE Publication, New Delhi, 2004
- John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, 'Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory'. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 82, No. 6 (May, 1977), pp. 1212-1241 Published by: The University of Chicago Press
- Kevin McDonald, 'Global movements: Action and Culture', Blackwell Publication, USA, 2006
- Sanjay Sanghvi, 'The New People's Movements in India', *Economic and political weekly*. 42, no. 50, (2007)
- Ray, Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, Rowman & Littlefield, 'Social movements in India: poverty, power, and politics'. Oxford University Press, 2005.

\*\*\*\*\*